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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5473
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3197
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3062
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3717
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1070
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3751
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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SUBJECT: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN
TURKMENISTAN

¶1. (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Despite Turkmenistan's huge hydrocarbon wealth and the government's multimillion dollar, lavish construction projects, there are many residential areas in Ashgabat and elsewhere that lack normal roads, street lights, water and sewer systems. Finding little or no assistance from the authorities in resolving their public service problems, residents have no choice but to take the initiative and resolve their problems themselves. Overcoming the Soviet legacy of relying on the state, people find various methods of working together to address social needs. By forcing people to take the initiative and solve their own problems, the government may unwittingly be laying the groundwork for civil society and independent political activity in the future. END SUMMARY.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

¶3. (SBU) Concerning private residential areas, local government generally does not provide residents with public services such as streets, lighting, water and sewer systems. It believes that the residents themselves should be responsible for sorting out these issues. The authorities supply public services only to state-owned residential areas, i.e. non-privatized housing areas. For example, if a certain road in a community is not repaired, the most active person among the residents initiates writing a letter to the hakimlik (district administration), requesting that the road be repaired. When the letter is written and the street's residents sign it, they take it to the hakimlik in person in order to have more impact and faster results. However, if there is no one to listen to them, or if the letter is not answered, then the most active resident in that community makes an estimate of how much the repair would cost if the residents fund it themselves. Then, the residents discuss whether they are ready to share the cost of repair among themselves. If they reach agreement, they start ordering the necessary construction materials and the services of laborers to carry out the repairs. In most cases, residents have to fund these public services out of their own pockets. However, sometimes the district administration provides laborers to carry out the work using materials procured by the residents.

NEGATIVE EFFECT OF SOVIET MENTALITY

14. (SBU) Over seventy years of communist rule is still deeply embedded in people's minds. They still expect the government to do everything for them free of charge. For instance, if the water supply system breaks down in a community, its residents would bring the problem to the attention of the authorities and wait forever for them to fix it. They turn to the authorities because they do not want to pay out of their own pockets. Only after waiting a month or two with no reply would they then do something themselves. Fortunately, there is always someone who takes the lead, convenes a community meeting to discuss the issue, and deals with the issue as a leader.

DEVELOPING THE SENSE OF CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

15. (SBU) According to Irina Dedova, Chief of Party of Counterpart International in Turkmenistan, citizen's groups in rural areas also need to increase their skills for greater participation in local governance. When asked what qualities a successful community leader must have, Dedova said that "It is important to be energetic, have initiative and a desire to work. A leader must be a person respected within a community and recognized by local authorities. He must possess an ability to start to resolve an issue and to lead it through." She said that once a community group successfully implements a project, "it gets the sense of ownership of the result. [Its members] start feeling civic responsibility for the work done." The main contribution of Counterpart is equipping local community groups with the skills for greater participation in local community affairs and establishing a forum for discussion of their pressing issues in order to start solving them together with local

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authorities and other stakeholders.

16. (SBU) Owing to the knowledge gained through Counterpart activities, local communities began contributing up to 45 percent of the resources necessary for the implementation of their projects. Moreover, they started initiating and implementing projects on their own. Thanks to Counterpart's methodology, four communities managed to have funds for their planned projects included in the local budgets for next year. Talking about some unsuccessful cases, Dedova said that they were caused by local authorities' suspicion and distrust of foreign assistance, and by local officials' lack of confidence to make independent decisions.

YOWAR - VOLUNTARY COLLECTIVE ASSISTANCE

17. (SBU) Traditionally, in rural areas, Turkmen conduct a Yowar - voluntary collective assistance to a family in the neighborhood. For example, if a family built a house and needed a roof but could not afford it, the family would summon its community for a Yowar. Volunteers from the entire community gather at that family's place in the early morning and provide a workforce to roof the house with the family's own materials. In gratitude for the community's help, the family serves a meal to the volunteers. Thus, when any other family needs assistance on a household-related problem, the whole community would render its assistance setting up a Yowar.

YASHULYS' (ELDERS) ROLE

18. (SBU) A special role in decision making in Turkmen society belongs to yashulys (elders). Often times, many social issues are resolved with the active participation of community elders whose opinion is valued by most of the local population. Yashulys take an active part in the realization of local projects supported by local state bodies and international donors. One of the examples of yashuly involvement in community projects is Counterpart's project involving the Council of Elders of Dostluk village near Turkmenabat. The local authorities helped the Council to open a police post to ensure order and prevent hooliganism, and to fix a road sign at the village school and nursery. With Counterpart's support, the community opened "Akyl Cheshmesi" Community Resource Point (CRP) that provided computers and other equipment, consultations with yashulys on everyday housing and family issues, and neighbor relations, and educational lectures for youth in cooperation with a

district police officer. For "support and significant progress in preventing violations of law and order, and protection of the legal rights and interests of the population," the local law enforcement bodies awarded the Council of Elders with a Letter of Honors in recognition of the CRP's outstanding activities.

INDIVIDUAL LEADERSHIP

19. (SBU) There are also examples of individual leadership in neighborhood activism. For example, an Embassy local staff member paid for the renovation of the common area inside his apartment building and installed a metal entry door for the security of both his family and his neighbors living in that part of the building. When asked why he decided to do it, he explained that "my neighbors working in low-paid jobs cannot afford to do the renovation, therefore, I decided to do it myself and then, collect a symbolic payment from them so that they feel they are part of the good deed." Another local staff member, while living in Mary, started removing the trash from the common area adjacent to his house. Following his lead, other volunteers from the community helped to clean the area from debris, thus, creating a more favorable environment for the community.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: The main obstacle to community participation in local governance is the embedded Soviet mentality that "the state decides all and will do it all itself" and that citizens' opinions will not matter. A contributing factor is the lack of necessary skills and low government funding for public services, as well as the absence of a place for discussion of local problems. However,

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ironically, there is a positive side to the government's failure to provide public services in private residential areas because, thus, unwillingly, the government pushes people to take the initiative themselves. Perhaps more active participation of citizens in community development eventually will lead to their more active involvement in local self governance in the future. END COMMENT.

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